

## INTRODUCTION TO INTERFACES ARAKAWA AND GINS SPECIAL ISSUE

When in 1966 Foucault published his philosophical survey of the origins of the modern age, the surprisingly best-selling book *The Order of Things* which concluded with a few ominous sentences announcing the “end of man,” the apocalyptic tone of his final predictions was greeted with incomprehension and dismay. Almost half a century later, and in the context of Arakawa’s and Gins’s strenuous effort to rethink concretely and dynamically the foundations of what makes us “human beings,” I believe that Foucault’s words have not lost their relevance and are worth quoting once more:

*In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order, the knowledge of identities, differences, characters, equivalences, words [...] only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear. And that appearance was not the liberation of an old anxiety, the transition into luminous consciousness of an age-old concern, the entry into objectivity of something that had long remained trapped within beliefs and philosophies: it was the effect of a change in fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.*

*If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (386-87)*

What Arakawa and Gins have done for forty years now has been to act upon Foucault’s admonitions by investigating the conditions of possibility of a new *episteme* that would take stock of the exhaustion of the old humanistic paradigm. This paradigm was defined by the promotion of “man” as an object of action and knowledge, man taken in the dimension of a mortal being whose authenticity was determined and conditioned by a singular relation to death. Since the beginning of Aristotelian logic, we have been taught to reason on the various ways in which we may be concerned by the fact that Socrates is mortal. Precisely by starting at the root and negating the “major” of such an apparent truism, Arakawa and Gins immediately launch a complex re-arrangement of knowledge that is capable of taking in technological advances that have marked our new century. Their revisionist re-definition of man in this post-human(istic) state is tantamount to launching a scientific revolution, if not a revolution *tout court*.

Such a gesture entails first moving back and forth between different disciplines that are endlessly recombined, connected and articulated, taken as they are in the nets of a scientific idiom that needs new terms so as to de-familiarize old notions weighed down by centuries of use and abuse (thus the importance of specific coinings such as “landing site,” “bioscleave,” “architectural surround,” and so on). But this linguistic creativity does not remain purely semantic, of course, since the new language it produces is born out of real problems and experiments, thus entails more than rethinking an *episteme* but working concretely on the crea-

tion of objects, from poems, novels, films and paintings to installations, houses, temples, parks, museums and even whole cities.

To return to Foucault, one can note that the last project that took up his later years was devoted to an exploration of what he called “bio-power,” a regime that “brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of the transformation of human life” (qtd. in Rabinow 17). Bio-power originally described a set of “procedures” and “technologies” that aimed at controlling the body; but as Foucault discovered as he was examining the history of sexuality and the way Ancient thinkers in Athens and Rome would talk about the “care of the self,” the same procedures could also be used to free the body, to teach it “how to live” better. Foucault sums up this type of “classical” and pre-Christian problem as the fundamental question: “which *techne* do I have to use in order to live as well as I ought to live?” (Rabinow 348).

These are pre-classical problems have also concerned a non-Western thinking about the “good life” to which Arakawa and Gins often refer. It would certainly be a life free from expressivity (this was, after all, the lesson Japan taught to Roland Barthes) and all the myths associated with subjective interiority. What is important here is that Arakawa and Gins feel the deep need to think in more than one language. The concrete problems posed by the issue of “what can I do to live well?” are those that a blind and deaf girl will face again and again if she wishes to keep on living like a normal person, as Helen Keller’s plight has revealed in a more drastic fashion. Not long after they met, Arakawa told Gins that Helen Keller, who each day upon awakening had to make the world anew, best represented what being an artist amounts to.<sup>1</sup> Arakawa and Gins force us first to go deeper and deeper into ourselves to test the limit of our perceptions, and analyze how we construct our world, and then apply some of their hypotheses to the building of large-scale structures. Given the increasing importance of these experiments and their mounting stakes, *Interfaces* felt the need to present a vast panorama of responses to Arakawa’s and Gins’s work. All these essays have been specially commissioned or rewritten for the occasion as they address the multifarious facets of their work. Jean-Jacques Lercercle’s important essay was circulated relatively early in the game, and a few contributors engaged in a fruitful dialogue with it. The vast array of discourses mobilized—from Deleuzian or Heideggerian philosophy and linguistic analysis to art criticism, phenomenology, urban studies, poetry, design, sociology, neuro-sciences, biotechnologies, neuro-physiology, cognitive sciences, Buddhist logic of the blank meaning, contemporary physics, embryology, evolution theory, ecology and, of course, architecture—attest to the immense vitality of a procedural thinking that traverses all categories. Coordinology is an apt word that can be used, and Jondi Keane explores its multi-modal organization in this very issue.

Inter-connectedness may be the key-word here, and it was inevitable that classical divisions and conceptual distinctions should overlap; nevertheless it was crucial to give a sense of progression to these essays, which is why the categories used to classify them, although they blend approaches and discourses,

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<sup>1</sup> From a note by Madeline Gins on her book *Helen Keller* or *Arakawa*.

map out roughly three broad domains: first, the philosophy of architecture that has been deployed in many works and texts by Arakawa and Gins; then, the poetic impact of paintings, poems and books, avant-garde art leading to a reflexive and productive process combining the theory of its own genesis in what may be called an “auto-poesis” and the generalizations of universal procedures for building; finally, a view of a possible future, from an utopian drift to a radical re-definition of life in the new possibilities that have opened. This is also why the double issue will begin with a new and unpublished text by Arakawa and Gins, in which they convey their sense that architectural “procedures” have to be generalized and also made public as widely as possible.

What remains to be accounted for is the preeminence of architecture in an activity that could be called “poetic” in the strictest sense of the word. Looking for predecessors in this slow emergence of a multiple concern for life, ethics and architecture, one might find some help in Hermann Broch’s trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers* (completed in 1931). In the third installment of the theoretical digressions on the “Disintegration of Values” that are interspersed throughout the narrative of the “Realist,” Broch addresses a similar issue:

*The primacy of architectural style among the things that characterize an epoch is a very curious phenomenon. But, in general, so is the uniquely privileged position that plastic art has maintained in history. It is after all only a very small excerpt of the totality of human activities with which an age is filled, and certainly not even a particularly spiritual excerpt, and yet in power of characterization it surpasses every other province of the spirit, surpasses even science, surpasses even religion. (397)*

The character who is at the origin of these meditations is a philosopher walking through the streets of Berlin in the late twenties, a critical thinker appalled as much by the coldness of modernist architecture as by the weakness of the new decorative *Kitsch*. In his musings on bad contemporary architecture, he echoes one of Broch’s most systematic assertions, the idea that whatever man does, it is in order to annihilate death:

*And perhaps all the disquietude which bad architecture evokes, forcing me to hide in my house, is nothing else than dread. For whatever a man may do, he does it in order to annihilate time, in order to revoke it, and that revocation is called space. Even music, which exists only in time and fills time, transmutes time into space, and it is absolutely probable that all thought represents a combination of indescribably complicated many-dimensional logically extended spaces. (398; transl. modified)*

My choice of Broch to introduce Arakawa and Gins is not as random as it may seem; like the poets-painters-architects Arakawa and Gins, he was a gifted novelist and poet allied with a capable mathematician who had studied Husserl and Brentano; like Arakawa and Gins, he was a practical utopian who had been a successful industrialist besides studying the philosophy of sciences and history, political theory and critically observing mass psychosis.<sup>2</sup> His theoretical thought never reached its full exposition as Nazi persecution forced him into exile, and Hannah Arendt was the first to keep the impact of his ideas alive (she wrote a glo-

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<sup>2</sup> The best systematic exposition of his philosophy is to be found in Schlant, especially 155-180 for an analysis of the concept of the “Earthly absolute” and its political and psychological consequences.

wing introduction to his essays in the collected works published by Rhein-Verlag in 1955 in which she stressed his concept of an “earthly absolute” in which death is abolished). Arendt has since been followed by the novelist Milan Kundera who claimed Broch as a model in the effort to write novels that leave room for knowledge, at least under the form of epistemological questions.<sup>3</sup> At the end of his life, Broch hesitated between writing novels and short stories after his acclaimed *Death of Virgil*, drafting literary essays on Austrian compatriots like von Hofmannsthal, and disseminating political tracts on the “earthly absolute,” “the city of man” and “total democracy.” The theme of the “abolition of death” led him to the idea of a strong democracy capable of borrowing some weapons from totalitarian regimes but able to preserve inalienable human rights, which includes for instance the suppression of the death penalty.

What Broch theorized as the need to overcome traditional dichotomies and dualisms has been superbly analyzed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in “The Tense of Architecture.” Indeed, for Broch as for Arakawa and Gins, the revolution that matters is a revolution in thought, and it will ineluctably be brought about by the creation of a new logic of sense and the senses. Here is Broch, once more, in one of his theoretical digressions:

*Now it may be asserted with some confidence that a sweeping revolution in the style of thinking—and the revolutionary aspect of all these phenomena entitles us to infer such a complete revolution in thinking—invariably results from the fact that thought has reached its provisional limit of infinity, that it is no longer able to resolve the antinomies of infinity by the old methods, and so is compelled to revise its own basic principles. (The Sleepwalkers 481)*

It is to such a revolution in thought and in the art of living-dwelling-building that we are invited by Arakawa and Gins, and happily, you are too.

**Jean-Michel Rabaté<sup>4</sup>**  
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<sup>3</sup> See his “Notes Inspired by the Sleepwalkers” in *The Art of the Novel* (47-67).

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